

International Address Parameters

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Editor

*Guide to Worldwide Postal-
Code and Address Formats*



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Addresses vary from country to country in two basic ways:

- (1) The items of information that make up addresses are different. The most apparent differences are in whether or not postal codes and provinces (or states or territories) are used in addresses. The differences extend to the remainder of the address as well. Some countries use building names in addition to or in place of building numbers and street names. Other countries designate addresses by the distance from some point.
- (2) The placement of the items within the address varies. For example, the postal code may be on a separate line or on the same line as the province or the town. Or the province may be on the same line as the town or a separate line. This applies to all items in the address.

These two basic differences lead to thousands of possible combinations in addresses worldwide. Fortunately, there are some common basic variations. In practical terms, these variations lead to difference in the number of lines and the length of those lines in addresses. This has an effect on labels, envelopes, forms and any other instrument where an address is printed or entered - and on the database structures in which addresses are stored.

The Universal Postal Union (UPU) address standards working group has identified more than 100 address elements (building number, street name, street type, floor designation, locality, postal code, province, etc.) currently in use in the countries for which address templates have been created. (The address templates make up the UPU's Standard S42: International postal address components and templates.) Most of these countries have more than one type of address used for delivery of mail: building addresses, post office boxes, large mail recipients, government agencies, military personnel, etc.

The table below, with statistics derived from a number of international databases maintained in the U.S., gives an indication of the requirements for addresses in terms of lines and characters.

Table 1

	Average number of address lines	Maximum lines	Average number of characters/line	Maximum characters/line
World	5.9	10	14.8	54
Germany	5.4	8	15.9	30
Mexico	6.1	9	18.6	30
U.K.	6.8	10	11.3	40
U.S.	4.1	6	18.9	30

Variation in the Number of Lines

The majority of countries use one or two lines to specify the delivery location within a town or locality - a post office box, a building name, a street address, or some combination of these and other elements. This creates a minimum address of 4 lines for international addresses: the name of the addressee, the delivery location (street or post office address), the town or locality, and the country. Organizational names, departments and titles can add additional lines to that number.

For the addresses with the fewest number of lines, some countries assign a postal code to large mailers, which can be private companies or government agencies. In many cases, these addresses have no street or post office address but are simply the name of the organization and the city or city and province with the postal code - or a complete address of two lines. Adding in an individual recipient and a title or department within the organization will add one or perhaps two more lines.

A very basic address with a town name but no postal code or province is used in about 40 countries. Some of these use descriptive addresses (e.g. the house with the red door across from the church). Twenty of these countries deliver only to post office boxes with no delivery to street addresses. Seven countries that delivery only to post office boxes also use a postal code or province as part of the

address. These simple addresses lower the average number of lines in an address, shown on the first line of Table 1 above.

The address standards for some countries specify that within the written address the building name and street number, the building name, the village or town, the postal center name, the province, the postal code and other such items should be on separate lines, resulting in many shorter lines in the address. This often results in an address with many short lines. In many international databases, these shorter lines are combined into a single line with a comma separating what would be different lines if the address were written by a resident of the destination country. Addresses are ideally written to conform to the standards of each country, of course, if that is possible.

Many East Asian countries, the U.K., some of its former colonies, and any countries using descriptive addresses generally use a greater number of lines in the address than the world's average. There can be five or six lines in addition to the addressee's name, organizational title, the organization's name and department, and the country name. Altogether this can come to a total of eleven lines in a printed address. The items might include a building name and a street address or a street address that requires naming the nearest main thoroughfare or intersection. Multiple administrative units might also be present, such as a city and a subdivision of it or a village name and a district in addition to a province or other larger administrative area.

Variation in the Length of Lines and Elements

Bearing in mind that address lines are made up of items of information, the number of characters per line is often longer because the individual words and terms used in addresses are lengthier. Obviously, when stored in a database, these longer individual words require that the fields storing the items of information or the lines of the address allow more spaces. Similarly, the lines will be longer when printed and may require a larger label or envelope window.

Compound nouns are particularly well known for creating lengthy street names. The Germanic languages of northern Europe all use compound nouns and lengthy street names are common in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries and any other countries using their languages. These lengthier words mean that fields in the database and the resulting address lines are longer. Unfortunately, there is sometimes no solution to this. For example, Escherheimerlandstrasse in Frankfurt, Germany is abbreviated Escherheimerlandstr. (Strasse is street in German.)

Asia has some of the longest words and some of the shortest. Some regions of India are known for lengthy individual, street and city names and some Indians will shorten their names for everyday purposes. However, the city of Thiruvananthapuram has no shortened form. Thailand is also known for very long names and words. Suffice it to say that the full transliterated name of Bangkok is Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahintharayutthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Phiman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit – a colossal 188 characters. In areas where such lengthy names occur, local residents normally can provide an abbreviation or shortened form. (This also applies to the names of individuals.)

On the other hand, some words will be extremely short in these same countries with two and three letter words. These very short words can make building and street names appear incorrect to those unfamiliar with them. Some online forms currently being used to capture addresses reject words that are too short, where an arbitrary number of characters must be entered to be considered "correct". This is problematic for those addresses with very short words.

The names of provinces or other administrative divisions can be abbreviated or written out, depending on the country. For those countries that specify the town name and province on a single line which might also include a postal code, the line can be quite lengthy. French Polynesia, Honduras, Moldova, Taiwan, Uruguay, and Venezuela all include the postal code, the town name, and an island or province on a single line of the address, although not necessarily in the order given here.

Names and Honorifics

Names and honorifics (titles such as Doctor, Professor, Mr. or Ms.) are closely linked to addresses since we send mail to individual at home or at companies although they are somewhat separate from the address itself. The comment above on the length of words also applies to individuals' honorifics and names. Lengthy or compound family and personal names are common internationally, as are names with more than two segments. The common American usage of first, middle and last name can be misleading since internationally a "middle" name may be part of the family name or the "last" name in the string may be the personal name. Single names are also used, particularly in some areas of Asia and the Pacific (e.g., Suharto or Thant).

Common honorifics in many languages require more than the 4 characters often used on English-language forms and some have no common abbreviation. The combined honorifics used in many countries can result in lengthy titles even when abbreviated, such as "Dr. Dr. Ing." Honorifics may precede or follow the individual's name. The traditional practice in some countries of placing the honorific on a separate line above the name when writing the address is still used, although it is increasingly rare. Honorifics remain very important in some countries. Conversely, honorifics are being used less often in other countries.

Variation in Formats

As mentioned above, the items required and their proper placement within a written address vary greatly between countries. The extent of these variations is often underestimated in planning for international addresses in databases or on labels or forms.

Some of the formats used for the town, province and postal code in current address standards illustrate the variety of placements of elements and the punctuation used.

Table 2

Town Postal code	Town Postal code	Town, Province	Postal code Town Province
Postal code Town	Town Province	Postal code Town, Province	Town - Postal code Province
Town - Postal code	Town Province	Postal code-Town Province	Town - Province Postal code
Postal code Town	Town Province Postal code	Town, Province Postal code Town Postal code, Province	

Postal code formats are extremely variable. All codes currently in use are numeric or alphanumeric and all letters currently used are upper case. The codes range from 2 numbers in Cote d'Ivoire for post office box addresses to the 11 characters used by Iran with a hyphen separating two groups of 5 digits. Embedded spaces and punctuation are common in postal codes. The format with the punctuation and spacing is particularly important to those countries that use automated sorting of incoming mail. According to Canada Post, the most common problem causing delays in processing mail from the U.S. is incorrectly formatted postal codes with no space between the two groups of 3 characters.

Conclusion

When designing for a specific country, fields to capture or store addresses can be tailored very exactly to the length of that country's address elements. With addresses from multiple countries stored in a single database, the variations among countries must be considered. These variations make requiring the completion of any particular address item somewhat problematic. Many countries do not use postal codes or provinces. Additionally, some valid addresses do have neither a street address nor a post office box. Others do not have a town name, but use a region or island in its place and so on.

International addresses from multiple countries are very likely to require more space, either with more address element or lines or with more characters in elements or lines or in both of these ways. When

these fields are formatted for printing on letters, labels, envelopes, or other items, international addresses are again longer, with more lines, longer lines or both of these.

Finally, addressing is subject to change as countries make changes and refinements to their addressing systems or put new national systems in place. Over time, the parameters for the world given in Table 1 are unlikely to change greatly. Being aware of the overall parameters and staying informed about potential and actual changes to addressing are needed to maintain data quality and deliverable addresses.

About the author

Merry Law, president of [WorldVu LLC](#), oversees their publications and worldwide marketing programs. She is editor of the authoritative *Guide to Worldwide Postal-Code and Address Formats* and author of *Best Practices for International Mailings*. Merry is a member of the Universal Postal Union POC Addressing Work Group and of the U.S. International Postal and Delivery Services Federal Advisory Committee. She can be contacted at mlaw@worldvu.com.

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